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ABSTRACT

This study examined transition issues faced by entry-level staff who were graduates of experientially based graduate level programs to prepare professionals for student personnel work. Forty-three recent graduates from two experientially based student personnel preparation programs were surveyed. The programs met three specific criteria: a counseling-based emphasis; planned, supervised, applied training experiences; and simulation activities incorporated into classroom learning. Respondents completed mailed self-report questionnaires concerning their experiential-learning experiences relative to their job-entry transition. Results were compiled using such criteria as post-graduate placement, degree of reliance on knowledge acquired in preparation programs, preparedness for entry position, and the components of the student's experiential-learning program. The study found that: (1) although graduates generally believed themselves to have good interpersonal and political skills, they felt less prepared when confronted by unfamiliar institutional milieus; (2) that while they were confident of their ability to apply student development theories, they had less confidence in their ability to engage in professional-level dialogue; and (3) that preparation levels varied for situations involving budgeting, legal issues, and multiculturalism. (CH)

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Entry Transitions of New Professionals: Perceptions of Graduates from Experiential Preparation Programs

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Abstract

To provide the amount of challenge needed to keep entry-level professionals engaged and growing professionally, it is important for student affairs staff who are hiring and structuring positions to be aware of competencies of recent graduates. Document describes transition issues faced by entry-level staff, graduates of experientially-based programs. Recent graduates were surveyed to learn about their most significant learning experiences and their comparative comfort level with their graduate preparation. Survey results and reactions from current entry level professionals are presented.

Entry Transitions of New Professionals: Perceptions of Graduates from Experiential Preparation Programs

The ability of graduate education programs to prepare new professionals for the student personnel work world depends on a variety of factors. Gaining a better understanding of these factors is increasingly important to the field's educators and practitioners, who face the challenge of continuing to attract, prepare, and retain successful new colleagues. Recent job market trends in student affairs suggest an increased need for new professionals in several specific functional areas, such as counseling, student activities and housing, as well as the improved availability of generalist positions (Janasiewicz & Wright, 1993). At the same time, entry into the profession often is experienced as difficult (Richmond & Sherman, 1991); new graduates' actual first placements sometimes do not match their expectations (Richmond & Benton, 1988); and attrition from the field is reportedly as high as sixty-one percent (Holmes, Verrier, & Chisolm, 1983).

A description of the factors that make up student personnel preparation programs in general exists in the current literature: masters programs tend to be housed in Counselor Education departments; students usually complete five or six college student personnel classes over their course of study; and there seems to be only limited emphasis on research in the form of

thesis work (Keim, 1989). Nearly all full-time faculty hold doctorate degrees, and they maintain research interests in counseling, student issues, and various student affairs management issues. Still, programs tend to rely heavily on practitioners such as vice presidents, deans, directors, and counselors to serve as part-time faculty, typically resulting in a strong practical emphasis (Keim, 1991).

Looking at job placement outcomes, programs do seem to produce graduates who find work in student affairs, though not always in the type of institution or first position anticipated (Richmond & Benton, 1988). Many graduates find the job market more competitive than expected. While many new professionals describe plans for eventually pursuing further education or a more advanced degree in the field, fewer actually follow through with these plans (Richmond & Benton, 1988).

In addition, there appear to be some significant differences among programs. Ebbers and Kruenpel (1991) found that only half of existing preparation programs met suggested CAS standards regarding the need for full-time faculty and small student-instructor ratios; opportunity for supervised practicum or internship experiences; and required coursework in human development, higher education and student affairs, as well as research and assessment. Richmond and Sherman (1991) reported similar differences in the educational directions taken by individual graduate programs. While some focused more heavily on

supervised work experiences such as assistantships and internships, others more strongly emphasized theoretical training. More specifically, three alternative program orientations were identified: counseling, administration, or human development. Many programs adopt a combination of these. According to American College Personnel Association data, most programs are counseling-oriented, followed by programs with a combined orientation, with an exclusively administrative focus being least common (Evans 1988).

While general descriptions of professional preparation are found in the literature, and specific program types have been identified, limited study exists comparing the relative impact of different program types on student transitions into professional roles. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the impact of one specific program type -- experientially-based preparation including a strong counseling focus -- on graduates' entry transitions into the student services work world.

Experientially-based Preparation

Three trends exist that combine to define a form of experientially-based professional preparation: building on a strong programmatic counseling foundation; utilizing a planned sequence of supervised, applied training experiences; and incorporating simulation activities into classroom learning.

First, there is a continued emphasis on foundational counseling skills. Student affairs managers must be able to establish trust and understanding with students, deal effectively with interpersonal problems, and recognize issues such as confidentiality (Gordon, Borders, Strode, & Mann, 19). Correspondingly, the majority of student personnel preparation programs capitalize on their Counselor Education affiliation by maintaining a counseling focus (Evans, 1988). Students in these programs generally complete courses in basic individual counseling skills and group dynamics. Further, more experientially-driven programs build on this base by emphasizing the graduate student's self-assessment, self-understanding, and development throughout the curriculum -- in supervised practice, professional development seminars, and counseling as well as student development classwork.

Second, there is a traditional and increasing reliance on supervised, practice-based learning experiences -- practica, internships, assistantships -- as key components of the preparation curriculum. Hands-on experience and supervisory mentoring together have the potential to enhance professional development and better prepare graduates for more effective entry transitions into professional roles (Richmond & Sherman, 1991). For example, students previously reported that applying new management skills (such as supervising staff, advising student

groups, addressing conflict) in internships was important to their formation of professional leadership abilities (Rogers, 1992). The opportunity to apply decision-making skills in hands-on situations similarly was cited as a significant component of values education in student affairs graduate programs (Young & Elfrink, 1991). Supervised experiences also provide training in multiculturalism when students are able to work with nondominant cultures, interracial groups, and address multicultural climate issues at institutions (McEwen & Roper, 1994).

The third trend is a growing emphasis on experientially-driven learning even within the class setting. Active experiential learning strategies highlighting the relevance of academic instruction to the student's professional and personal worlds outside the classroom have received increased attention in college student personnel programs (Young & Coldwell, 1993), counselor education (Parker, 1991), and the teaching of psychology (Benjamin, 1991). An increasing number of preparation programs rely on active learning principles in curricular design. In this area, Parker (1991) described a simulation method of instruction in which individual students in a class are assigned specific roles related to an organizational problem. Class members act as "manager," "staff," or "consultant" and maintain these roles as they address and attempt to resolve an assigned organizational "problem."

An extension of this approach is the "Simulation University" model (Curl & Flowers, 1995; Schwitzer & Gonzalez, 1993; Schwitzer, Gonzalez, Lamb, & Tomb, 1995). In this innovative course design, the entire semester of a capstone student services management course is organized as a simulation experience. Graduate students participate in the course after successfully completing a sequence of counseling-based classes, more traditional courses in student development theory, organizational management theory, and supervised practica in student affairs. The course covers supervision and organizational consultation. It provides emerging professionals an opportunity to make practical application of their knowledge of management and organization theories to personnel issues in higher education.

According to the model, instructors of the course act a "Vice President" and "External Consultant" for the "Division of Student Affairs" at "Simulation University;" students act as "Directors" of various student affairs offices; and each class meeting is organized as a divisional "Directors' Meeting." Students, instructors, and guests maintain their simulated roles throughout the experience. Over the semester, student "Directors" develop office missions and goals, staffing profiles, and budgets; identify and resolve personnel, organizational, and political difficulties; serve as organizational consultants; manage budgeting and restructuring crises; and develop program

assessment plans. Course materials and assignments are prepared in professional form and are accompanied by appropriate cover letters or memos, and students report to the "Sim U" president in a final class meeting "hearing." There is a move, then, toward using role-play and active learning strategies, with the simulation university course model providing a particularly comprehensive, intensive example of this.

Taken together, a program picture emerges that includes a core sequence of counseling skills courses and corresponding emphasis on professional and individual development; a substantial sequence of practica, internships, and assistantships; and experiential, active, or simulation courses that provide an emphasis on theory-to-practice applications.

Present Study

Recent graduate student cohorts from two experientially based preparation programs were selected for investigation. The two programs in the study were selected for inclusion because they met three specific criteria corresponding to the trends presented above: both programs assumed a counseling-based emphasis; each program emphasized a practioner-oriented focus and relied on an extensive sequence of practice-based preparation experiences; and the curriculum of both programs included one experiential course in which students recreate a simulated Division of Student Affairs, assume simulated student personnel

positions, and address the daily functions and crises associated with specific offices.

Three research questions were asked: Looking at the entry transition, first, to what degree do new professionals rely on and apply specific information and knowledge from a) theory courses, b) experiential counseling courses, c) experiential student personnel courses, d) practicum experiences, and e) graduate supervision relationships, to tasks associated with their first job experiences. Next, how do students from intensively experiential programs compare their level of preparation for negotiating the entry job transition to that of other new professionals? Finally, looking at preparation program components, what impressions do graduates have of various aspects of their preparation programs?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Recent graduates were selected for this study and mailed a self-report measure related to the four research questions. Recent graduation was defined as completing a program of study within the last three years, so that the cohorts surveyed (graduates in 1994, 1993, and 1992) from each program were surveyed would be negotiating the professional entry transition at the time of the study or immediately preceding it. A total of 63 recent graduates were asked to participate (21 from one

program and 42 from the other).

Of these, 43 agreed to participate and returned the self-report measure (16 from one program and 27 from the other), for a return rate of 68 percent. Participants were between the ages of 22 and 33 years old (Mean age=26.5; SD=4.2). Fifty-four percent were female and 46 percent were male. Nineteen percent were African American and 81 percent were white. No other ethnic groups were represented in the study. The participant group closely resembled the student demographic composition of the two programs. A preliminary statistical comparison was made between the respondent groups from the individual graduate programs. No statistically significant differences were found on the basis of gender or race representation, or for any responses to survey items, so that response data were analyzed in aggregate.

Measure

A face-valid self-report instrument was designed for use in this study. Brief survey information first was collected about graduates' initial placements and job responsibility levels. Then, Section I of the measure consists of ten Likert-type items related to the first research question. Respondents rate the degree to which the information and knowledge acquired in each of five components of graduate preparation a) matched that needed in the first year(s) of work; b) was specifically recalled and used during the first year(s) of work; and c) was related to effective

job performance. The five components included: theory-based counseling and student personnel courses, experientially based student personnel courses, experientially based counseling courses, applied experiences such as practicum and internship, and relationships including advising, supervision, and mentoring.

Next, Section II consists of three open-ended items requiring respondents to compare themselves to others in entry level student personnel positions. Respondents list separately those job tasks for which they feel prepared a) beyond, b) comparably, and c) below other entry level professionals. Finally, Section III consists of four open-ended items requiring respondents to identify those components of their graduate preparation program they would a) keep, b) change, c) eliminate, and d) add. These are followed by an open-ended question asking respondents to identify the most significant experience of their graduate work.

Program Descriptions

Each of the preparation programs examined is intensively experiential, based on the criteria of counseling foundation, extensive sequence of applied preparation experiences, and use of simulation coursework. In both programs there is a strong emphasis on the application of a counseling base to the student's individual and professional development. Similarly, there is a strong emphasis on experiential learning, significant mentoring,

and supervision. They are a moderately-sized "College Student Personnel Administration Program" and a smaller-sized "College Student Development Program". Both are housed with the Counseling departments of the College of Education at their university. Both require thirty-six hours of graduate work leading to a master's degree in education.

The curriculum of each program includes a substantial sequence of counseling courses (individual counseling, helping relationship, group dynamics), a core sequence of college student personnel coursework (student development theory, student personnel services, higher education administration) and research methods, and one course in career development or lifespan development. Each includes supervised experiential learning requirements: at least two semester-long field practica or a twelve-hour internship, in addition to two years of formal assistantship experience. A classroom professional development seminar accompanies the field-based experiences. Finally, at least one course in each program is conducted as a "Division of Student Affairs" simulation along the lines of the Simulation University model, in which students assume Director roles and manage staffing, budgeting, assessment, leadership, crisis intervention, and other professional tasks throughout a full semester. These courses are prepared as capstone experiences in which students draw on previous theoretical material and practice

in preparation for their transition to the actual post-graduate demands of student affairs work. A difference between the two programs is that one requires additional coursework in educational resources, while the other requires the completion of a master's thesis project on a topic selected by the student.

Results

Post-Graduate Placement

Looking preliminarily at new professionals' initial placements and levels of position responsibility, graduates in the study appeared to work in a diverse group of first job areas: the largest group was working in residence life (34%), followed by admissions/records (9%), career services (9%), student activities (7%), and service learning (7%). Small numbers also worked in campus security (2%), child care centers (2%), financial aid (2%), Greek life (2%), or multicultural student services (2%). Regarding levels of responsibility, eighty percent of graduates entered the workforce at mid-manager positions with advanced responsibility for an office, center, or service area: the largest group was working as Area Directors or Area Coordinators (51%) in residence life, Greek life, and other services, followed by those working as office or center Directors (16%) or Assistant Directors (13%). The remaining group (20%) worked as direct service providers without advanced administrative responsibility.

Reliance on Graduate Preparation

Turning to the first research question about new professionals' use of knowledge from components of their graduate preparation program, Table 1 presents descriptive data regarding the match between knowledge acquired in preparation programs and knowledge needed in entry positions; the incidence of recalling and using specific preparation program knowledge in entry positions; and the degree to which material learned in preparation programs helped new professionals effectively perform their jobs. Taken together, the highest rated aspects of graduate preparation were, in order of effectiveness: internship and practica experiences, experiential counseling classes, mentoring and supervisory relationships, and then experiential student personnel classes. Theory courses were seen as relatively least useful. However, responses were generally favorable for all aspects of preparation.

Further, a significant difference was found regarding how often graduates recalled and used information from experientially-based student personnel courses, according to their area of work. New professionals in more hands-on student development jobs (student activities, student services) used and applied experiential course information more consistently and often than those in more administratively-focused positions such as records or financial aid ($X^2=45.60$; $Df=30$; $p< .05$). Seventy-

five percent of those in direct student services positions used and applied this information very often (rating of 6 or 7), with everyone in this category using the information relatively often (92% of ratings at five or higher). Those in more administrative positions were evenly distributed regarding their application of simulation course information, from rarely (15% endorsed a rating of 3 or 4) to somewhat often (one-third provided a rating of 5), to more often (38% rated at 6). No other differences were found according to entry position or position level.

Preparedness for Entry Positions

Next, a qualitative analysis was conducted in order to answer the second research question, about graduates' level of preparation in comparison with other new professionals. Table 2 provides a qualitative summary of those areas in which graduates most commonly reported preparation beyond their peer cohort. The most commonly cited factors (agreement of at least 22% and reaching 37%) related to the areas of General Experience Level and of Process Skills, rather than to specific tasks. Four factors emerged related to General Experience Level: extensive preparation for a particular entry position; extensive previous experience in work settings generally; ability to apply theoretical concepts; and ability to manage and complete multiple tasks and responsibilities. Two Process Skill factors emerged: Work-related interpersonal skill and political/organizational

skill. The more specific skills that were commonly cited (15% - 34% agreed) fell into three areas: Methodological Skills, Specific Task Skills, and Professional Development Skills. These are listed in Table 2.

Areas of preparation comparable to and below others are presented in Table 3. A common response here (40%) was "very confident," "extremely prepared," or no areas of preparation below others. Among those who cited areas of comparable or relatively low preparation, several very specific factors emerged. First, in contrast to their favorable self-comparison for *applying* theory, respondents often perceived their *knowledge* of student development theory to be comparatively less broad or well-developed than others. Second, respondents rated their ability to address multicultural diversity issues as only comparable to or below that of others. Third, a very common factor appeared related to feeling unprepared for new, unfamiliar institutional types different from that of one's graduate experience. In addition, two very common specific skill areas in which respondents felt underprepared were 1) budgeting and 2) contracting and legal concerns.

Program Components

Moving to alumni impressions of graduate preparation, respondents said most often they would *keep* the field-based practical experiences (internship, practicum, assistantship;

76%), counseling emphasis (41%), and simulation course (39%) -- followed by mentoring/advising (20%), thesis (38% of students with a thesis option), and student personnel theory courses (17%). The strongest suggestions for program *change* were for even greater variety in practicum experiences (24%); more exposure to theoretical, organizational, and institutional diversity (22%) in both classroom courses and practical experiences; greater room for electives outside the student personnel curriculum, for example in advanced counseling, business, or education (20%); and to rethink the role of the practicum seminar course in both programs (20%). Most consistently, they would *add* greater research emphasis (34%); a multicultural student development or multicultural counseling component (17%); even greater or more advanced counseling focus (17%); further exposure to the specific skills of budgeting (17%) and handling legal issues (20%). Correspondingly, the "most significant graduate experiences" most often cited were assistantships/practicum, counseling courses, and mentoring/supportive learning environment. Other common responses were completing research projects, presenting at a national conference, and the simulation course. Finally, recent alumni advice to current students appears in Table 4.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of graduate preparation on

new professionals' entry into student personnel work. Overall, graduates appeared prepared for this transition. Even when considering variations in job titles across different student affairs offices, the large majority of experiential program graduates were able to enter the workforce at mid-manager positions with advanced administrative or leadership responsibility. Graduates appeared most confident in their general experience level, including skills similar to those that chief student affairs officers look for in potential middle managers: interpersonal communication, ability to prioritize and manage multiple responsibilities, leadership skill, and general competency (Benke & Disque, 1990).

While impressions were generally favorable regarding most aspects of preparation, the experiences gained in field placements and through counseling-based courses were seen as most valuable for new workers. They appeared more likely to recall and apply knowledge from those educational components than from other courses or experiences. In fact, in line with what might be expected, those students entering more hands-on student development jobs used and applied experience and simulation-based learning even more consistently and often than students who moved into more administrative services such as records. Counseling courses, supervised experiences, and the simulation course were all highly valued and appeared to play an important role in

students' preparation.

Interestingly, the job components for which respondents most commonly said they felt exeptionally well-prepared -- prepared beyond other entry level colleagues -- were process skills related to interpersonal ability and political awareness. Understanding and responding to political norms and interpersonal climate are critical skills for surviving and excelling in an organization (Payne & Pettinghill, 1986). Newman and Carpenter (1993) concluded that "political skills should be learned at the entry level and honed on the way up just like any other skills" in student personnel work (p.223). This appears to be a particular strength of the experiential, counseling type of preparation -- and may potentially contribute to entry transition success and job satisfaction over time. Students also leave with a variety of specific skills such as program development and crisis management.

At the same time, three developmental questions (or paradoxical issues) were raised about experiential preparation programs. First, although graduates view themselves as having advanced interpersonal and political skills, they tend to feel less prepared for diverse types of institutions and divisional climates that are unfamiliar or different from those of their graduate institution. They experience new work settings as "not approaching things the best way", "having administrative rather

than student development goals", or "unsupportive." They seem less prepared for institutional differences based on region, size, and affiliation. In turn, a question is raised as to how preparation programs might more effectively expose students to various institutional types, prepare students for various divisional goal-directions, and introduce them to greater theoretical diversity. These programs may need to consider a practicum "exchange" option with other campuses, greater reliance on visiting guest-speakers, and greater emphasis in classroom discussions on different conceptual approaches.

Second, although the new professionals appear exceptionally confident in their ability to apply student development theory, they are less confident in their knowledge and ability to engage in professional dialogue about theory. They do not rate theoretical coursework as highly central to their preparation. They raise questions about the role of the classroom seminar component of the practicum course (in both programs). Questions have been raised previously about the strength of theoretical and critical thinking components of student affairs preparation (Manning, 1992; Miller & Carpenter, 1980). In this area, graduates of experiential programs find themselves at a particular disadvantage compared with their peers. Programs may need to identify instructional methods that can more effectively emphasize "theory" and its role in the "theory-to-practice"

pedagogical approach.

Third, there is variability in preparedness levels for the specific tasks of budgeting, handling legal issues, and addressing multiculturalism. More room for electives in the curriculum also was suggested to allow students to develop auxillary competencies in area such as business administration, education, or advanced counseling. The programs in this study currently include budgeting, legal issues, and multicultural concerns at several points along the curriculum: in student development courses, the simulation class, and practicum/ internship. It is unclear why some students appeared better prepared than others in these areas. The need for new approaches to these skills requires further investigation.

This study was limited in several ways. Student preparatio was based on self-report. Follow-up study is needed next that relies on more behavioral measures of new professional competencies, such as supervisor ratings or first-year job evaluations. The study was descriptive and limited to two preparation programs, so that further research is needed to confirm the generalizability of findings here. While there was a relatively limited sample size, the return rate of about 70% represented nearly the entire possible target research population.

In this initial study, support was suggested for the

effectiveness of experiential, counseling preparation approaches. Respondents were generally confident new professionals who felt prepared for work demands, compared themselves favorably with other entering professionals, and perceived themselves to be capable in their new roles. They were able to describe stronger and weaker aspects of their preparation. Further research is needed that ideally compares the entry experiences as well as actual job performance of students from different types of programs. This may extend the findings reported here and lead to further understanding of those factors that contribute most to effective graduate preparation.

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Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations for Alumni Survey Responses.

Graduate Experience	Information/Knowledge Matched Position Need[1]	Recalled and Used Specific Information[2]	Knowledged Helped Apply Job Skills[3]
	X (SD)	X (SD)	X (SD)
Student Personnel & Counseling Theory Classes	5.0 (1.24)	4.8 (1.21)	4.6 (1.17)
Experiential Student Personnel Classes	6.0 (0.97)	5.6 (1.27)	5.5 (1.08)
Experiential Counseling Classes	6.1 (0.90)	6.0 (0.92)	5.8 (0.81)
Practicum, Assistant, Internship, Volunteer	6.3 (1.28)	6.5 (1.10)	6.4 (0.78)
Advising, Supervision, Mentoring Relationships	6.1 (0.90)	6.2 (0.99)	6.1 (0.97)

Notes.

[1] Scale item ranges from a low of 1 "Not At All" to a high of 7 "Very Closely"

[2] Scale item ranges from a low of 1 "Never" to a high of 7 "Very Often"

[3] Scale item ranges from a low of 1 "Very Little" to a high of 7 "A Great Deal"

n = 45

Table 2.

Areas of Preparation Beyond Other Entry Level Professionals.

Area	Themes
	Most Common Responses
General Experience Level	1. Preparation for all aspects of the specific position (e.g, residence life, career services, orientation)
	2. General ability to "hit the ground running" (Direct experience in a work environment)
	3. Ability to *apply* student development theory to practical situations; Ability to *apply* student development knowledge base to work setting
	4. Ability to complete work tasks; Ability to manage multiple tasks
Process Skills	1. Work-related interpersonal skills: Interactions with students, staff, faculty, administrators; Managing both positive and negative interactions; Managing difficult issues; Presenting my own views/communication skills
	2. Work-related political/organizational skills: Applying networking abilities; Understanding political dynamics of Division and University; Understanding institutional decision-making procesesses; Understanding "political realities" related to student affairs role Using organizational consultation and group process skills

Table 3.

Areas of Preparation Comparable to and Below Other Entry Professionals.

Preparation Comparable to Others	Preparation Below Others
Most Common General Experience Areas	
1. General knowledge of student development theories, counseling theory, basic methods	1. Knowledge of student development theory: Others have had more theoretical coursework and greater exposure to different theories
2. Addressing multicultural and diversity issues	2. Addressing multicultural and diversity issues
	3. Diversity in institutional type: Understanding unfamiliar institutions; Understanding different student affairs divisional climates, goal-directions, and supervision climates; Understanding institutional types such as public/private, large/small
Most Common Skill Areas	
1. Budgeting	1. Budgeting
2. Contracting and managing legal issues	2. Contracting and managing legal issues
Common General Response	
"Very confident"/ None	"Extremely Prepared"/ None